

'Nixon' just misses greatness

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For students of American politics, there isn't much in Oliver Stone's three-hour-plus psychobiography of Richard Nixon that we haven't heard before — except the parts Stone made up.

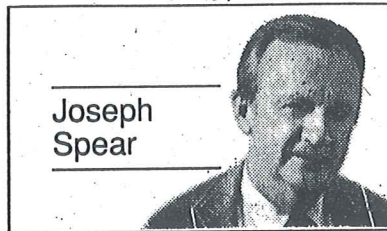
Which is not to say that the film isn't fascinating.

For me, the most spellbinding moment came in the final minutes of the movie, when actor Anthony Hopkins recreates Nixon's rambling speech to his staff on his last morning in office. It is superbly portrayed as an unrehearsed display of raw emotion and is every bit as eerie as it was in the original.

At one point, Nixon said: "Always remember, others may hate you, but those who hate you don't win unless you hate them — and then you destroy yourself."

Richard Nixon had just rendered the most succinct summation of his own life and career that could possibly be uttered. His hatreds — of the "Eastern establishment," of the press, of the Kennedys, of the well-educated, of political protesters — had consumed him in a fire of his own making.

At that point, I wanted to scream: Stop the movie here. This is it, the natural ending. Oliver



Stone didn't do it, of course. He let the thing drone on for several more minutes.

Stone is like that. He doesn't know when to shut up.

Indeed, if he had edited out his crackpot conspiracy theories and some of the cinematographic gimmickry, he might have a film of epic proportions. Instead, the movie is riddled with fabrication and fantasy, dense with sound and image, and the Nixon story never gets told in a comprehensible way.

The best thing about "Nixon" is that despite a degree of caricature, it portrays the man as a human being with a fatal flaw that was rooted in a frigid childhood. He was raised in a poor family by a stern father and a pious mother. Two of his brothers died of consumption. He grew up introverted and angry.

From his earliest moments in politics, he was a polarizer and a smear artist who depicted his opponents as disreputable Communist sympathizers. He saw enemies lurking everywhere, picking on him, making "unprincipled and vicious" charges and conducting "whispering campaigns" against him. He was convinced "they" all hated him and were dedicated to his destruction.

What Stone suggests with flashbacks to Nixon's childhood and adolescence is the sad truth that Nixon hated himself. Deep inside, he saw himself as a loathsome person who deserved all the crap his critics gave him. I left the theater feeling sorry for Richard Nixon. Not forgiving, mind you. Just sorry.

The worst thing about "Nixon" is the fabrication. It was extremely disturbing to someone who is familiar with the Nixon story to see "facts" invented, events jumbled, truth distorted.

Nixon didn't say "I'm not a crook" during a television speech; he said it to an audience of 400 people at an Associated Press Managing Editors Association meeting in

Orlando. He didn't shove his spokesman Ronald Ziegler after a quarrelsome press conference; he pushed him at a VFW convention in New Orleans.

The worst lie of all is the suggestion, never fully expounded, that Nixon's deepest, darkest secret had something to do with his involvement in a CIA plot to kill Fidel Castro that somehow resulted in John Kennedy's assassination.

There is a kernel of truth here: The CIA did work with the mob to kill Castro. It is entirely possible that Castro retaliated by having Kennedy killed. But the historical record is fairly clear that Nixon had nothing to do with it. It is an expansion of Oliver Stone's favorite conspiracy theory, the one that he spelled out in "JFK." It is a lamentable conceit on his part that he continues to portray fiction as history.

No, I'll go even farther: It is a deplorable continuation of the "recreation" trend so apparent in TV news, film and even books. Future generations will get their "history" from this mix of reality and rubbish, and that is a frightening thought.